

# Open-plan versus walls

## the great debate



The shift from traditional walled offices to open-plan workspaces, which began in the 1960s, was hailed as the way forward for office layout. But if open-plan was chosen because it was fashionable (rather than functional) and cheaper (rather than more cost-effective), it's worth questioning the decision. Perhaps a swing back to the 60s is in order ...

In fact the open-plan approach has proved remarkably versatile, offices have seen innumerable manifestations over subsequent years, with the basic desk and partition approach evolving into pods and interchangeable workstations. The debate should, of course, be about the best match for office work styles and white-collar efficiency: what's the best way for people to work - and specifically your people?

### **Conventional fixed wall**

A closed layout sees employees separated into private spaces with fixed walls, for use by an individual or shared between a few

Private offices provide auditory and visual privacy and are recognised as a status indicator



doesn't need to involve the rest of the office.

But broader communication in a closed office environment tends to be more formal and organised, even scheduled, with employees seeking interaction quite deliberately. The need for sharing information can be satisfied by scheduled meetings and tools such as email, conference calls and online chat.

The danger is that even with these mod cons individuals risk being out of the loop, detached from first-hand experience of events and omitted from ad hoc discussions. Besides, formal communication can be more time-consuming - issues to discuss and decisions to be made accumulate between meetings, so when colleagues do eventually get together they take longer to cover the necessary agenda.

From that angle, a fixed-wall office can serve as an obstacle to easy workflow and open communication. What's more, commercial office space is becoming more expensive everywhere; the need to maximise your available space is stronger than ever. Modern work and employment patterns also place a premium on flexibility. The fixed-wall office has become something of a luxury, and could well be a barrier to optimum working.

#### Fitting everyone in

An open-plan office costs less to construct and allows for increased density and on the whole, gives more bang for your buck. But it's a broad umbrella term, ranging from completely open spaces with shared tables or hotdesks, to low- or high-panelled cubicles or pods that aren't too far removed from the layout of a fixed-wall office.

Do employees want nothing between them? A user weighs in: "We are a small team which is better suited to a totally open office," says Mikele Urgarte, a PR executive at a local consultancy. "We have become very close-knit, which I suppose you have to be - there is no real privacy except for on your computer screen or the pages in front of you.

"On the plus side if I verbalise a need for advice or creative input the response is immediate."

workers tasked with similar roles.

There's an element of status at play here: a private office is often a mark of your role in the organisation, especially here in the UAE. But more generally, a closed office will always be useful in situations where an employee requires uninterrupted concentration in order to do their job - they do not need constant engagement with colleagues to be productive.

The fixed-wall can also be beneficial for team-building. Share a room between a small group of employees and they'll be able to use open communication to fulfil functions while creating a strong bond that

## Avoid generic solutions:

1. Design and furnish for specific job requirements
2. Enable adjustability and control
3. Provide status markers suited to rank and occupation
4. Allow personalisation

## Consider the boundaries:

1. Avoid large unbounded groups of workstations
2. Keep workstation area in the range of 2.4 x 2.4m to 3.6 x 3.6m
3. Keep panels above 1.37m where visual privacy is important
4. Maximize access to windows and daylight
5. Clean regularly and perform ongoing maintenance

Source: National Research Council of Canada



The use of glass partitions creates private space without making the offices look boxed-in

## Health hazard

Early this year a report from Dr Vinesh Oommen at the Queensland University of Technology generated worldwide attention as employees heard what had long been feared: open-plan offices are bad for your health! As much as 90 percent of the research conducted by Dr Oommen at the Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, showed that the outcome of working in an open-plan office was negative.

The main problem is the increased risk of spreading contagious illnesses, such as the influenza virus, as people move easily around the space. He found that working in an open-plan office can contribute to high blood pressure. Emotional health can suffer too - the lack of privacy can cause feelings of insecurity and constant disruptions can be a source of stress.

Dr Oommen suggests that with the negative effects of low productivity, absenteeism, low morale and the resultant high staff turnover the open-plan office works out to be more costly in the long-run and small, private offices are the better choice.

According to Cornell University's International Workplace Studies Program, understanding nonverbal behavioural cues is vital for this set-up to be fruitful. With no doors to close, people need to recognise the body language which indicates that their colleagues do not want to be interrupted. This can be a process of trial and error, but learning to read these subtle cues is crucial in order to avoid conflict.

Office space with no separating partitions leaves nothing to the imagination and there is limited or no visual and auditory privacy. But there are ways around that: Heidi Demuyck, interior designer at Summertown Interiors, suggests creating private booths that workers can use when they need to make a phone call or have a one-on-one meeting.

A danger of open-plan setups is over-extending their flexibility, avoid being greedy and cramming too many people into the space - a situation that has been likened to battery farming. It's simple: the more people occupying the space, the more potential for distraction.

The other issue is the warehouse effect. An unbounded office is not ideal for larger teams in big spaces, because it can create an environment that seems unstructured and impersonal rather than flexible and friendly. Users have to move around to seek engagement with a colleague seated

away from them, distracting others and perhaps defeating the purpose of an entirely open environment.

Restricted to small teams with similar job descriptions, the benefits of an open-plan approach are nonexclusive, open communication, transparency and instant feedback - especially important in fast-paced work environments and situations that require quick decisions.

### The highs and lows of an open-plan office

Weighing in on the furnishings aspect of an open-plan office, Gautam Bhatia, senior interior designer at Marlin Furniture, says that the advantage is flexibility. "The furniture system can be configured in any option, depending on the client's requirements. Assembling and dismantling is easy, as is shifting from one place to another."

The initial fit-out is less expensive too: "Installing partitions that do not reach the ceiling reduces the cost of AC and MEP, therefore working out cheaper than the closed office option."

Shreemen Prabhakaran, Security Controller - Operations, Emirates Airlines, has experienced both types of office plans, and in his view the advantages of an open office outweigh any perceived disadvantage. "The open office plan encourages communication and collaboration amongst colleagues, which leads to better solutions to the problems at hand," says Shreemen (who works in an environment with low-panelled cubicles grouped together).

He adds: "My experience is that the open office also leads to better communication between management and employees. This means that both sides work together more, which improves overall performance. While there may be distractions, the iPod is a useful tool if they prove too much ..."

### The way forward

It's important to match working styles to the physical environment, but in general it makes sense to have a mix of both fixed-wall and open-plan, enclosed offices. The clever layout might include an open space in the centre, a kind of market square for ad hoc interactions. And glass is a clever alternative to solid walls or partitions to give the sensation of openness while ensuring privacy for users.

Pay attention to furniture choices. Different job descriptions mean employees

Heidi Demuyck is the designer behind Summertown Interiors Gold LEED Certified office interior

